

Becoming independent learners: International student transition from an English for Academic Purposes course to postgraduate studies

by Laurel Naomi Acton

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Education)

Under the supervision of: Associate Professor Susan Oguro
Dr Neil England
Professor Lesley Harbon

University of Technology Sydney
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

June 2021

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Laurel Naomi Acton, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy (Education), in the School of Education, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program.

Production Note:

Signature: Signature removed
prior to publication.

Date: 30 June, 2021

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the expertise and support of my Supervisory team throughout this study. My Principal Supervisor, Associate Professor Susan Oguro, has been unfailingly wise, astute, patient and diligent in her role. Professor Lesley Harbon, my Co-Supervisor, kindly filled in as Principal Supervisor during a time of need, and her valuable feedback has improved my academic writing skills. Dr Neil England, my other Co-Supervisor, has helped me develop my ideas through lengthy discussions and made useful suggestions for the thesis. All three Supervisors infused a sense of humanity and lightness into the doctorate - much appreciated! Thanks, too, to several teaching academics at the university where the study was conducted, who generously gave their time early in my research to explain common issues of first-semester international students in their discipline.

I greatly appreciate the positive messages of support from my circle of family and friends throughout this project. In particular, thanks go to my partner, Robert, who patiently listened to long diatribes about my latest study-related ideas and contributed insightful ideas for me to consider. My gratitude also goes to my friends Denise and Helen, who patiently read through chapter drafts as 'interested outsiders' and provided me with useful feedback.

While no editorial support was used in the writing of this thesis, its presentation was greatly enhanced through the expertise of Leigh McCawley (graphics) and Indra McKie (layout).

I dedicate this thesis to the participants in my study and other students in their learning situation.

Publication and Presentation History Associated with Thesis

Publication:

Acton, L. (2020). From L1 undergraduate degree to EAP course to university studies: The story of two transitions. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning* 14(2), 120-133.

<https://journal.aall.org.au/index.php/jall/article/view/635/435435489>

Conference presentations:

Acton, L. (2019, September 14). *From EAP to postgraduate studies: Strategic agency in a self-learning environment* [Conference presentation]. 14th University of Sydney TESOL Research Network Colloquium, Sydney, Australia.

Acton, L. (2019, November 25-27). *From English college to postgraduate studies: Strategic agency in a self-learning environment* [Conference presentation]. AALL Conference, Fremantle, Australia.

Acton, L. (2020, October 10). *Challenging the dark myths of machine translation* [Conference presentation]. Postgraduate Conference on Multilingualism (web-based), Sydney, Australia.

List of Acronyms

ASQA: Australian Skills Quality Authority. National regulator for Australia's VET sector.

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

CHC: Confucian Heritage Culture. 'CHC' is often used to refer to educational systems thought to be influenced by Confucianist ideals. This is a contested term, as discussed in section 2.4 and throughout Chapter 9 (Discussion). In recognition of its problematic aspects, speech marks are included in its use in this thesis, thus 'CHC'.

CILO: Course Intended Learning Outcome. Relevant to subject documentation at targeted Australian university. See Table 6, section 4.3.4.ii.

EAP: English for Academic Purposes

EGAP: English for General Academic Purposes

ELICOS: English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students. English-teaching programs for international students studying in Australia on a student visa.

ESAP: English for Specific Academic Purposes

ESL: English as a Second Language

GMP: Good Manufacturing Practice. Title of postgraduate course at targeted university.

ICC: Intercultural communication competence

IEC: Intensive English Centre. Public educational institutions in Australia providing intensive English teaching to newly-arrived, high school aged students whose first language is not English.

IELTS: International English Language Testing System

L1: The first language of the student

L2: The language (here English) which is not the student's first language and is used as the medium of instruction

PTE: Pearson Test of English

SILL: Strategy Inventory of Language Learning. Strategy scale for assessing use of language learner strategies, devised by Oxford (1986).

SLO: Subject Learning Objective. Relevant to subject documentation at targeted Australian university. See Table 6, section 4.3.4.ii.

TEQSA: Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency. Australia's independent national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education.

TESOL: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

VET: Vocational Education and Training. Courses in Australia which provide training and certification in workplace skills and associated technical knowledge.

Abstract

This study examined the experiences of international students as they transitioned to their first postgraduate semester at an Australian university from an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at an English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) college. Independent learning, expressed through critical thinking and active involvement in academic tasks, is a vital component of success in many postgraduate courses. However, this way of learning can be unfamiliar to students from traditional, teacher-directed educational backgrounds. The purpose of the study was to explore the nature of the process by which participants developed as independent learners, by engaging with first-semester challenges in their postgraduate course.

This qualitative case study was conducted at a university in Sydney, Australia. The eighteen participants, representing five nationalities, were enrolled in twelve different postgraduate degrees across the university. Three in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant, spanning the period from the completion of their EAP course to late in their first postgraduate semester. Data collection and analysis focused on two particularly difficult aspects of participants' first-semester experiences: understanding lecture content and completing a linguistically challenging assignment task. The theoretical framework for the study underpins its purpose of investigating varied participant experience in changing educational contexts. Within a social constructivist paradigm, complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 1997) acts as a metatheory, supported by two aligned theories: the strategic self-regulation model (Oxford, 2017) and usage-based theory (Bybee, 2003, 2006).

Findings revealed that the participants' resourceful strategy use was at the core of their growing independence as learners. The three main types of strategic response employed by the participants were their efforts to fulfil academic requirements despite skill gaps, engagement with tasks involving critical thinking, and study management in a less-structured educational setting. The participants' strategy use in the postgraduate context was intensified by pedagogical differences between their L1 undergraduate degree, EAP course and postgraduate studies. The major original contribution of the study arising from the findings is the Strategic Self-learning Model, which frames participant

development as an iterative, holistic process based on pragmatic decision-making.

This study's findings contribute knowledge to the under-researched area of the EAP pathway to postgraduate studies, benefiting both universities and English colleges by enhancing understanding of international student transitions. The findings also provide fresh perspectives on the application of language learning strategy research. Recommendations to optimise the transition experiences of students by supporting their developing independence are provided.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	iii
Publication and Presentation History Associated with Thesis	iv
List of Acronyms	v
Abstract	vii
Table of Contents	ix
List of tables	xvii
List of figures	xvii
 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	 1
1.1. The research problem and the study's objectives	1
1.2. Personal orientation to the research	3
1.3. Context of study	5
1.3.1. Background information on international students in Australia	5
1.3.2. The university and its pathway college	7
1.3.2.i. The College	8
1.3.2.ii. The University	9
1.3.3. Overview of ELICOS sector	10
1.3.3.i. Language issues: ELICOS and university sectors	10
1.3.3.ii. Functions of EAP courses in the ELICOS sector	11
1.4. Purpose of the study	12
1.5. Research question	12
1.6. Theoretical and methodological approaches of the study	13
1.7. Significance of the study	14
1.8. Limitations of the study	16
1.9. Structure of the thesis	16
	 ix

1.10. Summary of Chapter 1	18
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	20
2.1. Introduction	20
2.2. Public discourses on international students in Australia	20
2.3. Interculturality and internationalisation of the university	22
2.4. Adaptability of 'CHC' students	25
2.5. Independent learning	26
2.5.1. Framing of research into development of an independent learning approach by international students	28
2.5.1.i. Student response to skill deficiencies	28
2.5.1.ii. Nature of student response to challenge	29
2.5.1.iii. Awareness of values behind learning approaches	30
2.5.2. Critical thinking	31
2.5.2.i. Definitions of critical thinking	32
2.5.2.ii. Critical thinking: negative positioning of international students	34
2.5.2.iii. International student challenges with critical thinking	34
2.5.2.iv. Support for the development of critical thinking skills	35
2.5.3. Development of independent learning in EAP courses	36
2.5.3.i. Impact of L1 degree and EAP course delivery on development of independent learning	38
2.5.3.ii. Ways to teach independent learning in EAP courses	38
2.6. EAP courses: Skill focus	39
2.6.1. Academic skill teaching	39
2.6.2. Writing skills	40
2.6.2.i. Generic versus disciplinary writing skills	40
2.6.2.ii. Genre transfer to disciplinary requirements	41
2.6.3. Understanding lectures	42
2.7. Student use of resources	43
2.7.1. Translation strategies	44
2.7.2. Institutional academic support	45
2.7.3. Communication with lecturers	46
2.7.3.i. During assignment work	46

2.7.3.ii. Assignment feedback	47
2.7.4. Communication with peers	48
2.7.5. Use of models and exemplars	49
2.8. Summary of Chapter 2	51
 CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	 52
3.1. Introduction	52
3.2. Outline and justification of theoretical framework	52
3.3. Theoretical paradigm	53
3.4. Theoretical models	55
3.4.1. Complexity Theory	55
3.4.1.i. Instability	56
3.4.1.ii. Pattern formation	57
3.4.1.iii. System as a whole with interacting parts	58
3.4.1.iv. Unity of person and environment	59
3.4.1.v. Contextual factors: Objective or subjective?	59
3.4.1.vi. Unit of analysis within network of complex systems	60
3.4.1.vii. Key complexity theory features relevant to study	61
3.4.2. The strategic self-regulation model	63
3.4.2.i. Introduction	63
3.4.2.ii. Relevance of strategic self-regulation model for this study	63
3.4.2.iii. Strategy definition	64
3.4.2.iv. Flexibility and complexity of strategies	67
3.4.2.v. Value of qualitative research into strategy use	68
3.4.2.vi. Learner attributes	69
3.4.2.vii. Synthesised theoretical approach with holistic elements	71
3.4.2.viii. Key features of strategic self-regulation model relevant to this study	72
3.4.3. Usage-based theory	73
3.4.3.i. Introduction	73
3.4.3.ii. Framing of language use	74
3.4.3.iii. Frequency	74
3.4.3.iv. Conceptual factors	75
3.4.3.v. Key features of usage-based theory relevant to this study	75
3.5. Summary of Chapter 3	76

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY	77
4.1. Introduction	77
4.2. Qualitative approach	77
4.3. Research design	78
4.3.1. Case study	78
4.3.2. Choice of settings	79
4.3.3. Participants	80
4.3.3.i. Participant selection	80
4.3.3.ii. Participant sample size	82
4.3.3.iii. Participant recruitment	82
4.3.3.iv. Participant profile	83
4.3.4. Data collection methods	89
4.3.4.i. Interviews	90
4.3.4.ii. Documents	92
4.3.4.iii. Modification of data collection process	94
4.3.5 Data analysis	96
4.3.5.i Interviews	96
4.3.5.ii Document analysis	101
4.4 Ethical considerations	105
4.4.1 Ethics Approval and implementation	106
4.4.1.ii Informed consent	106
4.4.1.ii Confidentiality	106
4.4.2. Data validation	107
4.4.2.i. Credibility	107
4.4.2.ii. Methodological rigour	110
4.4.2.iii. Transferability	111
4.5. Summary of Chapter 4	112
CHAPTER 5: PARTICIPANTS' EDUCATIONAL TRANSITIONS	113
5.1. Introduction	113
5.2. Reasons for overseas study	115
5.2.1. Future career	115
5.2.1.i. Career reset	116

5.2.1.ii. Contribution to society	118
5.2.2. Personal adventure	119
5.2.3. Staying in Australia	119
5.2.4. Degree of family influence	120
5.2.5. Shift in goals	122
5.3. Perception of different educational contexts	124
5.3.1. Perception of L1 undergraduate studies	124
5.3.2. Perception of EAP course	126
5.3.3. Expectations of university studies	128
5.4. Summary of participants' outlook on entering postgraduate studies	129
5.5. Need for independent learning in early postgraduate studies	130
5.6. Self-learning	131
5.7. Summary of Chapter 5	132
 CHAPTER 6: FIRST-SEMESTER CHALLENGES	 134
6.1. Introduction	134
6.2. Understanding lecture content	135
6.2.1. Evidence of need for independent learning	135
6.2.2. Affective aspects of lecture experience	136
6.2.3. Factors affecting lecture comprehension	137
6.2.3.i Institutional factors	138
6.2.3.ii. Learner-related factors	141
6.2.4. Summary of challenges with understanding lecture content	144
6.3. Completing assignment tasks	145
6.3.1. Impact of EAP course on postgraduate assignment experiences	146
6.3.2. Other factors affecting postgraduate assignment experience	147
6.3.2.i. Institutional factors	147
6.3.2.ii. Learner-related factors	151
6.3.2.iii. Task alignment	155
6.3.3. Summary of assignment challenges	160
6.4. Summary of Chapter 6	160

CHAPTER 7: STRATEGY USE AS AN EXERCISE OF LEARNER INDEPENDENCE	162
7.1. Introduction	162
7.2. Strategy use for understanding lecture content	162
7.2.1. Key lecture-related strategies	163
7.2.1.i. Preview-lecture-review framework	163
7.2.1.ii. Modification of preview-lecture-review strategies	166
7.2.1.iii. Translation strategies	168
7.2.1.iv. Modification of translation strategies	170
7.2.1.v. Requesting help	172
7.2.2. Improved comprehension over time	173
7.2.3. Summary of strategies for understanding lecture content	174
7.3. Strategy use for completing assignment tasks	175
7.3.1. Forethought: Understanding the task	175
7.3.1.i. Strategies for reducing task anxiety	177
7.3.1.ii. Reviewing lecture material	178
7.3.1.iii. Requesting help	179
7.3.1.iv. Using a model or exemplar	180
7.3.2. Performance: Accessing source content and writing response	183
7.3.2.i. Accessing relevant content	183
7.3.2.ii. Constructing an outline	186
7.3.2.iii. Writing a response	187
7.3.3. Summary of strategies for completing assignment tasks	190
7.4. Summary of Chapter 7	190
CHAPTER 8: REFLECTION ON GROWING INDEPENDENCE	192
8.1. Introduction	192
8.2. Reflective processes supporting growth of independent learning approach	192
8.2.1. Reflection on progress in meeting postgraduate academic demands	193
8.2.1.i. Critical thinking skills	193
8.2.1.ii. Fulfilling task requirements	196
8.2.1.iii. Lecture review for assessment purposes	197
8.2.1.iv. Study management	198
8.2.1.v. Factors associated with less effective self-reflection	199
8.2.2. Changes in educational self-positioning	201
	xiv

8.2.2.i Interview 1	201
8.2.2.ii. Interview 2	202
8.2.2.iii. Interview 3	203
8.2.3. Reflection on personal qualities related to independent learning	204
8.2.3.i. Overcoming academic challenges as a path to maturity	205
8.2.3.ii. Types of personal development	206
8.2.3.iii. Less effective personal processes	208
8.3. Summary of Chapter 8	209
 CHAPTER 9: THE STRATEGIC SELF-LEARNING MODEL	 210
9.1. Introduction	210
9.2. Explanation of the Strategic Self-learning Model	210
9.2.1. Learning for Self	214
9.2.1.i. Self-directed goals	215
9.2.1.ii. Self-identified needs	219
9.2.2. Learning by Self	228
9.2.2.i Role of metacognition as primary metastrategy	231
9.2.2.ii. Role of metastrategies in complex strategy use	235
9.2.2.iii. Strategy use as challenging engagement	237
9.2.2.iv. Support from postgraduate scaffolding	239
9.2.3. Learning about Self	241
9.2.3.i. Iteration	243
9.2.3.ii. Bidirectionality	252
9.3. Summary of Chapter 9	260
 CHAPTER 10: CONCLUSION	 261
10.1. Introduction	261
10.2. Review of the study's precepts and procedures	261
10.2.1. Theoretical framework	261
10.2.2. Methodological approach	262
10.3. The study's contributions and their significance	263
10.3.1. Contributions based on research approach	264
10.3.1.i. Research based on learning approach	264

10.3.1.ii. Research based on strategy theory	265
10.3.2. Contributions to understanding international student experience	269
10.3.2.i. Challenging, hybridised adjustment process across EAP pathway	269
10.3.2.ii. EAP preparation for disciplinary studies at university	270
10.3.2.iii. Pragmatic outlook of international students	272
10.3.2.iv. Development of independent learning through challenge and support	273
10.3.2.v Internationalisation through inclusiveness	274
10.4. Recommendations	275
10.4.1. Recommendations for ELICOS colleges	276
10.4.2. Recommendations for Australian universities	278
10.4.3. Recommendations for future research	280
10.5. Limitations of the study	282
10.6. Concluding thoughts	283
REFERENCES	284
APPENDICES	299
Appendix 1: Email to English College	299
Appendix 2: Ethics Approval	300
Appendix 3: Student invitation leaflet	302
Appendix 4: Speech at College Graduation Ceremonies	303
Appendix 5: Email to Subject Co-ordinators	304
Appendix 6: Participant Information Sheet – Students	305
Appendix 7: Participant Information Sheet – Subject Co-ordinators	307
Appendix 8: Participant Information Sheet for Lecturers	309
Appendix 9: Consent Form - Students	311
Appendix 10: Consent Form – Subject Co-ordinators	312
Appendix 11: Consent Form – Lecturers	313
Appendix 12: Interview guide	314
Appendix 13: Common student difficulties with assignments	319
Appendix 14: Visual prompt for Educational self-positioning	320
Appendix 15: Example of analytical summary	321
Appendix 16: Codes and sub-codes used in data analysis	323
Appendix 17: Example of mindmapping as data analysis tool	326

List of tables

Table 1: Relevance of Oxford's (2017) strategy definition to the study.....	66
Table 2: Metastrategies in Oxford's (2017) model.....	68
Table 3: Key learner attributes supporting strategy use	70
Table 4: Demographic data about participants.....	84
Table 5: Data collection methods.....	89
Table 6: Relevant sections of Subject Outline.....	93
Table 7: Summary of procedure for analysing interview data.....	97
Table 8: Summary of procedure for analysing subject documents (CDA)	103
Table 9: Phases of the Strategic Self-learning Model.....	114
Table 10: Relationship of undergraduate degree/work to postgraduate course.....	117
Table 11: Task phases in the two models	212

List of figures

Figure 1: Theoretical framework of the study	53
Figure 2: Participants by nationality	85
Figure 3: Participants by age and gender	86
Figure 4: Participants by disciplinary area.....	88
Figure 5: The Strategic Self-learning Model (linear version).....	132
Figure 6: The Strategic Self-learning Model (phase version).....	211
Figure 7: Learning for Self	215
Figure 8: Learning by Self.....	229
Figure 9: Learning about Self.....	242
Figure 10: Iteration in the Strategic Self-learning Model.....	245
Figure 11: Bidirectionality in phase sequence (Pattern 1)	254
Figure 12: Bidirectionality in phase sequence (Pattern 2)	256
Figure 13: The Strategic Self-learning Model.....	259